A Unique Find on Easter Island

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Find Circumstances

In 1986-1988 The Kon-Tiki Museum sponsored an archaeological project in Anakena bay on Easter Island. In 1987, test excavations were conducted in the area about 75 m east of Ahu Nau Nau, and a distinct settlement layer was recovered there. This layer consists of dark brown clayey soil and is between 40-60 cm thick. Two different carbon samples were dated by the C-14 method. They were found to be of almost identical age, dating back to A.D. 1126-1272 and A.D. 1153-1268.

In one of the test trenches (trench S) a harpoon-head (Plate 1) was found in the settlement layer. This is the first find of a prehistoric bone harpoon from Easter Island, and it will here be submitted to a closer presentation and discussion.

The Harpoon

The harpoon, which is made of bone, can be placed in Skinner's "variety 1" (Skinner 1937:64) or in Sinoto's "type A" (Sinoto 1970:116). This type is described as flat or rounded harpoon-heads (in this case flat) with a single foot at the base and usually with two barbs and a hole in the mid-section for the line. The Easter Island harpoon head has the following dimensions: Length 60.4 mm, greatest width at barbs 12.7 mm and greatest thickness 4.0 mm (Plate 1 shows the harpoon of Easter Island.)

Harpoon-heads in Polynesia were first found among the "Moa-hunters" from different parts of New Zealand, and also on the Chatham Islands. They were classified by Skinner into six different varieties (Skinner 1937). Harpoon-heads of prehistoric origin from the Marquesas Islands have also been known for a long time, first as surface finds and later, when excavations started in 1956-57, they were found in stratigraphic contexts (Suggs 1961:94). Y.H. Sinoto continued the excavations on Marquesas and divided the harpoons into two main categories; type A, which is supposed to be older (found from Sinoto's phase II-IV, A.D. 600-1800), and type B which is younger (only found in the latest phase) (Sinoto 1970:116). Harpoon-heads have also been reported from Mangareva by R. C. Green (Sinoto 1970, Green m.s. 1960). A possible indication that they occurred in the early settlement at the Vaito'otia site on Huahine, in the Society Islands, is the find of a wooden stick which, according to Sinoto and McCoy "looks like the fore shaft of a toggle harpoon" (Sinoto & McCoy 1975:168). Sinoto also indicates that "A small fragment of what may well have been a harpoon was found at Vaito'otia" (Sinoto 1988:124), and Emory mentions, that a whale bone harpoon head, was found on this site (Emory 1979:203).

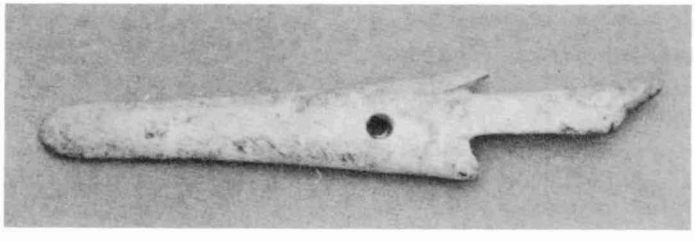

Plate 1. Harpoon head found at Anakana in 1987.

Anell suggested that the Polynesian harpoon (only found in East Polynesia) was related to northern sub-Arctic cultures, such as the Neolithic cultures in Japan or on the Kuriles (Anell 1955:68). Sinoto also makes the observation that there is an amazing similarity of harpoons distributed in the areas along the northern Pacific coast and the Polynesian harpoons. However, he remarks that the technique of securing a shaft is different (Sinoto 1970:117).

In Melanesia the harpoon is known only on the islands in the Torres Strait and on a short coastal strip on New Guinea (Anell 1955:67). Anell interprets these harpoons to be an eastern offshoot of an old harpoon-hunting complex probably originating from the shores of the Indian Ocean (Anell ibid.:68), and that they are probably not related to the Polynesian harpoons.

Interpretations of Harpoon Relationships

Skinner and Sinoto both postulate that there is a close connection between Marquesas and New Zealand harpoon-heads (Skinner 1937:72; Sinoto 1970:116). Green suggests that the similarities of harpoons and burial customs on Mangareva and Marquesas indicate a relationship between these islands (Sinoto 1979:61; Green m.s.1960). Sinoto further interprets the Marquesas as the most likely source for the dispersal of harpoon-heads in East Polynesia, but he also mentions that the occurrence of similar harpoons at the northern Pacific and the middle of the Pacific cannot simply be ignored (Sinoto 1970:117).

The early debate concerning harpoon-heads in the Pacific area has been very centered around occurrence, style, and diffusion. But, one may ask, if it is possible or relevant to go on to search for similarities between societies or to talk about dispersal patterns, simply due to single artifact types? Does a harpoon on Easter Island have to be dependent on the existence of a harpoon in another place? If we are to do relevant comparisons now and in the future, we have to do contextual artifact analyses (Hodder 1986:118). This will give us a more complex picture of societies which subsequently can be more meaningfully compared with each other. Instead of relying on single artefacts wrenched out of their contexts, I think we have to look at the material culture as a text, in which each artifact is a single word, which gets its real meanings only in connection with other artifacts or contexts. In other words, the single artifact reflects more than a material remain, it also reflects an ideological base. Obviously it is difficult to read a text and understand its meaning if some of the words are missing.

The first question then is: Why are there harpoons in

these Polynesian settlements? The question, "why harpoons?", has not really been discussed in previous research, probably because it seems too obvious: They are of course for hunting. If that is self-evident, the next question ought to be, what kind of hunting? The bone material from the settlement where the Easter Island harpoon was discovered has been studied, in order to find an answer to this question (Wallin & Martinsson-Wallin 1988). The analysis indicated that dolphin/ porpoise was the most important food source found (in this midden material). It is possible that the dolphins/porpoises have been hunted with harpoons. On Easter Island there is ethnographic data indicating that access to pelagic fish was ruled by ritually defined fishing periods. And big fish like tuna and also the turtles were generally reserved for the chiefs *(ariki)*, and the principal warriors *(mata-toa)* and, during the tapu period, only the supreme chiefs and their oldest fishermen *(tangata-honui)* had access to these resources (Ayres 1981:71-72, Métraux 1940:173). These restrictions may very well have included the catch of dolphin/ porpoise as well.

The next question to be addressed is: What kind of economies have been indicated in other early settlements of Polynesia? Are they reflecting the same economic base as the one found in the early settlement at Anakena on Easter Island? There are only a few such settlements excavated in Central Polynesia but, in fact, dolphin/porpoise and pelagic fish were also common at the early site at Fa'ahia/Vaito'otia on Huahine (Leach, Intoh & Smith 1984:187). In these two cases (Easter Island and the Society Islands) there are no ethnohistoric records of dolphin/porpoise hunting, but on Easter Island there are petroglyphs which probably depict the dolphin/porpoise.

If we turn to the northern Pacific coast, they used their harpoons for hunting seals and whales (Spencer 1977:56-119). So, does the harpoon in connection with the finds of dolphin/porpoise bones suggest that the early settlers of Polynesia were big game hunters? Hunting is not considered to be the most common survival strategy in societies situated between 10-39 degrees from the equator. The dominant economic base there is usually food collecting and fishing (Orme 1981:45). This kind of economy, combined with agriculture, provided the dominant food sources in the protohistoric Polynesian society.

In performing further studies concerning these matters it would be of value to investigate if bones from tuna and dolphin/porpoise and harpoons may be found in other early settlements on Easter Island. The Anakena area is traditionally considered as the main settlement for the paramount chief on the island and, as indicated above, the bone remains may be different there than in other settlements. Thereby the hypothesis of a general early economy of big-game hunting might be tested. Furthermore it is of interest to find out if other early Polynesian settlements show the same economic pattern that is indicated here.

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